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Poetic Techniques of "the Suspension of Disbelief" in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

NONAKA Mikako

Introduction

"The suspension of disbelief," which is Samuel Taylor Coleridge's coinage, has been considered as crucial to readers' responses to literary works by many students. M. H. Abrams states that a poet can't avoid the responsibility for reliability and favor regarding common experience, common sense and common morality to get readers' imaginable agreement (28). Thomas McFarland, basing on the preface of 1765 in Samuel Johnson's *Johnson on Shakespeare*,[1] considers the idea of the suspension of disbelief to be a sensual and illusionary core (338). Colin Radford points out the irrationality of the assumption that a person can have a feeling without an appropriate conviction,[2] however, Elisa Galgut affirms the validity of the readers' response against Noél Carroll's negative verdict.[3]

Among few research on poetic techniques in Coleridge's works, A. C. Swanepoel claims that metaphor used in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" ["The Mariner"] (1798) has to do with "the suspension of disbelief (205), which enables a supernatural world not to alienate the readers despite the unreal content. This paper attempts to clarify poetic techniques in "The Mariner": the coinage or the new combination between known words, the embodiment of the ancient mariner's consciousness, and the disembodiment of the supernatural beings. Then, it does how these poetic techniques effect the depictions of this work, each of which combines together to give this work the effectiveness of "the suspension of disbelief."[4]

1. The Suspension of Disbelief

Coleridge states, in *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* [*BL*] (1817), as follows:

> . . . my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. (*BL* 2:6)

The editors of *BL*, James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, note that "shadows of imagination" borrows from Theseus' saying, "The best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them" (Ⅵ210-11) in William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (*BL* 2:6).

Furthermore, Puck says, in epilogue, as follows:

> If we shadows have offended,
> Think but this, and all is mended,
> That you have but slumb'red here
> While these visions did appear. (Ⅵ217-20)

"Shadows" refer to imaginable beings like fairies, or actors playing in a nonexistent world. "[V]isions" show such a realm as includes characters, which appear during a play, but disappear at the moment of the ending. Coleridge, in "The Mariner," is supposed to have tried to activate the readers' imagination. He mentioned readers' holding a deep interest and a feeling of reality for the supernatural events as "the suspension of disbelief."

On the other hand, the genre of the ballad itself appropriately helps make poetic techniques to induce "the suspension of disbelief" because

it traditionally depicts the supernatural. Originally, the ballad, which had been handed down orally among the folk from generation to generation, provided people with a sense of refreshment in common and boring everyday lives through unusual events. Frank Egbert Bryant points out that ballads having flourished in the end of 18th century aimed to give readers a fear or a shock, rather than artificially attempted to draw significant human experiences (67). G. Malcolm Laws states that the reason is that a human mind is seeking for a kind of surprise, a mystery of life or knowledge of another world (70).

However, regarding the history of the ballad, he states as follows:

> . . . the supernatural is used for religious, philosophical, and psychological purposes, as well as those of art....It may be said that the well-established traditional status of this type [ballad] makes it appealing to the poets, particularly since it allows so much imaginative latitude. Most literary balladists of the supernatural have resisted the temptation to be merely sensational. In the respectably long history of this type, the desire to shock has been far less prominent than the search for truth. (39)

Laws writes that the principle purpose of representing the supernatural is to seek the truth of a human mind rather than to give readers a sensation or a shock. Therefore, the purpose looks successful due to poetic techniques to induce "the suspension of disbelief" for the supernatural, or to seek the truth of a human mind, in "The Mariner."

2. The Coinage or the New Combination

In "The Mariner," the coinage or the new combination is found as a poetic technique. It represents many unknown supernatural phenomena by using the depictions of really existing things. The reason why this technique is needed is the fact that described objects are quite unknown to readers. They can imagine supernatural phenomena or be-

ings only by relying on the image of known real things. According to Swanepoel, metaphors used in "The Mariner" combine concrete images of real things. They need not novelty or uncommonness of real things, but simplicity, familiarity, and commonality. Though Swanepoel suggesting a new kind of metaphor, this paper does the coinage and new combinations, which include Swanepoel's metaphor, and clarifies unfamiliar or strange combinations between known words more than Swanepoel does.

For example, new combinations in the depiction of the supernatural sea in the third edition of *Poetical Works* [*PW*] (1934) are revealed as follows: "a painted ocean" (118), "The very deep did rot" (123), "the slimy sea" (126), "the rotting sea" (240), and "The charmed water burnt alway / A still and awful red" (270-71). "[P]ainted," "rot," "slimy," "rotting," and "burnt alway / A still and awful red" are common known words representing states of real things. However, we can find the new construction that the combination between words consists of common well-known words. They prompt readers to feel a sense of reality even in the supernatural world.

On the other hand, "The death-fires," a coinage, show a novel combination between two known words, "death" and "fires."

> About, about, in reel and rout
> The death-fires danced at night;
> The water, like a witch's oils,
> Burnt green, and blue and white. (The third edition of [*PW*] 127-30)

The coinage being created from known words urges them to hold on the known images of "death" and "fires" in imagining unknown "The death-fires." It intends to draw the readers' human interests, from the inner nature, in unknown beings, and makes them believe as if they existed in reality.

Moreover, Swanepoel points out that the uncertainty with "witch's

oils" evokes a strange feeling and a fear of the supernatural sea (204). As for "The death-fires" and "witch's oils," not only the uncertainty with the unknown, but also their purpose taking revenge on the cruel ancient mariner give a sense of fear and reality to the unknown supernatural sea. As a poetic technique, the coinage evokes a revengeful image upon the ancient mariner because of his crime of killing an albatross. Thus, Coleridge coined new combinations of known words having such a revengeful image.

As the other example, the description of real things represents the specter-ship gradually approaching the ship as follows:

> And straight the Sun was flecked with bars,
> (Heaven's Mother send us [the ancient mariner and the ships' crew] grace!)
> As if through a dungeon- grate he [the Sun] peered
> With broad and burning face.
> . . . . . .
> Are those her [the skeleton-ship's] ribs through which the Sun
> Did peer, as through a grate? (The third edition of *PW* 177-86)

The sun was flecked with the masts of the specter-ship, which appears to look at the ship boarded by the ancient mariner through a "dungeon-grate," giving the readers the eerie impression of a prison. The image implies that not the sun but he himself is a prisoner to be punished. A "dungeon-grate" is a coinage, but both "dungeon" and "grate" are known words. Coleridge created the coinage, or the new combination of words, to look familiar in the unknown world though the coinage has an element of uncertainty because of the supernatural beings. That is the point of limitation of the coinage as a poetic technique.

"[B]urning face" of the sun, which has made the ancient mariner suffer with heat since the ship was driven beneath the equator, repre-

sents the anger of God. The ominous look of the sun connotes the punishment which the ancient mariner should perceive. However, he misunderstands the specter-ship as grace (a lifesaving ship) from heaven (178) while the personified sun suggests the ill omen of the specter-ship's approach.

Moreover, the coinage in the depiction of the supernatural sky is revealed as follows:

> The upper air burst into life!
> And a hundred fire-flags sheen,
> To and fro they were hurried about!
> And to and fro, and in and out,
> The wan stars danced between. (The third edition of *PW* 313-17)

"[F]ire-flags," a coinage, consist of the two known words of "fire" and "flags." Also, "to and fro, and in and out," which is the movement of the stars, shows the familiar scene of a dance, similar to that "The death-fires" (128) dance "About, about, in reel and rout" (127).

Even though William Wordsworth claimed, regarding "The Mariner" in the note of the second edition of *LB* (1800), that "the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated" (Wordsworth and Coleridge *Lyrical* 276), Coleridge is supposed to have created the coinage. Such coined words, or new combinations of words as "The death-fires," "witch's oils," "a dungeon-grate," and "fire-flags" work as a device that cannot be seen unknown beings, but can be seen known beings.

3. The Embodiment of Consciousness

The poetic technique to induce "the suspension of disbelief" is concerned not only with Coleridge's coinage, but also with the embodiment of the ancient mariner's consciousness. When he begins to be forgiven for his crime by God, he narrates how he had a dream as follows:

I dreamt that they [the buckets] were filled with dew;
And when I awoke, it rained.

My lips were wet, my throat was cold,
My garments all were dank;
Sure I had drunken in my dreams,
And still my body drank.

I moved, and could not feel my limbs:
I was so light—almost
I thought that I had died in sleep,
And was a blessed ghost. (The third edition of *PW* 299-308)

The depictions of dream (299) (303) and reality (300-02) are mixed. The motif of rain combines dream and reality, and the border between them is lost. The ancient mariner experiences the events in his dream as reality because he begins to drink water in his dream, and then his dry throat was healed by the rain when he woke up. H. W. Piper notes that reality is reflected in dreams (85), and the rain in the mariner's dream reflects his desire for water in his extreme situation. C.M. Bowra claims that the ancient mariner's physical sense in this extreme situation is represented in this scene (61) and the physical sense seems to urge readers to feel senses of fear and reality.

When the mariner loses his sense of his limbs and of himself in his sleep, he thinks that he could die. The reason why he wants to die is that he cannot die even though he continues to look at ship crews' cursed eyes as follows: "Seven days, seven nights, I [the ancient mariner] saw that curse, / And yet I could not die" (the third edition of *PW* 261-62). He cannot endure his fate of life-in-death. His wish for death reflects the difficulty of his situation, namely, being played with by the supernatural. Ian Wylie suggests, according to a biblical interpretation, what the ancient mariner had seen for seven days and nights was the

Creation by God, a circulation of life—life, death and rebirth—in chaos (156). The ancient mariner has seen the cycle of life of the fellow mariners, and knows life as a process of the cycle, and tends to lose tenacity for life-in-death.

Moreover, in his sleep, he thinks to have become "a blessed ghost" like he wished. However, he cannot stay in one place, neither in the sea nor on the land, and must wander all his life: as he says, "I pass, like night, from land to land" (586) because he cannot be blessed after death. He cannot prove his existence objectively without the others, and cannot distinguish between dream and reality, or between life and death. Through the depiction of the ancient mariner's physical senses, his extreme situation surrounding him and reflecting his feelings is shown as lively and realistic.

4. The Disembodiment of Supernatural Beings

The poetic technique of "the suspension of disbelief" is also the way to describe supernatural beings, which are not almost described and limitedly described. Originally, Coleridge's idea about the relationship between fear and imagination, which is concerned with the disembodiment of supernatural beings, is expressed in LectureX Ⅱ as follows:

> The sensations which they [objects in dream] seem to produce, are in truth the causes and occasions of the images; of which there are two obvious proofs: This has always appeared to me an absolute demonstration of the true nature of ghosts and apparitions-such I mean of the tribe as were not pure inventions. . . . The fact really is, as to apparitions, that the terror produces the image instead of the contrary; for inomnen actum perceptionis influit imagination, as says Wolfe [Christian von Wolff]. O, strange is the self-power of the imagination-when painful sensations have made it their interpreter, or returning gladsomeness or convalescence has made its chilled and evanished figures . . . strange is the power

to represent the events and circumstances. . . . (*Complete* 4:321)

Coleridge points out that human feelings cause the figure of ghosts to appear, using two examples to reveal the relationship between sensation and the figure as proof. He regards ghosts and apparitions not as mere inventions and believes that the figure of ghosts does not affect fear, but rather that fear affects them. He focuses on the mysterious workings of imagination to intervene between fear and figures.

According to the editor of *Lectures 1808-1819 on Literature*, R. A. Foakes, "inomnen actum perceptionis influit imagination" means that "the imagination is involved in every act of perception." Thus, it is turned out that Coleridge thinks that a sense (fear) affects imagination, and subsequently that the figure of ghosts can be seen. In "The Mariner," he attempts a poetic technique, few descriptions of supernatural beings, to evoke deep feelings of fear to draw out readers' imagination. He embodies less the supernatural beings in *Sibylline Leaves: A Collection of Poems* [*SL*] (1817), which was published by himself, than in *LB* published jointly with Wordsworth.

For example, "the (polar) spirit" (128) in *LB* is depicted as follows:

> And some [the ship's crew] in dreams assured were
> Of the Spirit that plagued us [the ancient mariner and the ship's crew] so:
> Nine fathom deep he [the Spirit] had follow'd us
> From the Land of Mist and Snow. (The first edition of *LB* 127-30)

"The spirit" left the Arctic pole, following the ship with the ancient mariner on board, at nine fathoms deep. Its figure is not depicted at all and the reason why it follows the ship is not clear. This poetic technique must be Coleridge's design because the gloss, the prose sentence explaining the scene at the edge of the page in the third edition of *PW*,

notes as follows: "A spirit had followed them [the ancient mariner and the ship's crew]; one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels. . . . They are very numerous, and there is no climate or element without one or more" (gloss 131-34). The gloss excuses the invisible nature of the spirit and the fact that it is disembodied.

The other gloss states, "The lonesome spirit from the south-pole carries on the ship as far as the line, in obedience to the angelic troop, but still requireth vengeance" (gloss 377-82), which answers an another question, why the spirit follows the ship. The spirit, which loved the albatross killed by the ancient mariner, carried the ship from the South Pole to the Equator to take revenge on him, and yet requires more revenge. It turns out that the spirit has ambiguous feelings of love, hate, and anger, so the fact leads readers to imagine the supernatural beings not only as mysterious and fearful beings, but also as beings with emotion.

The spirit's revenge upon the ancient mariner is explained only by the voices of two invisible fellow spirits. (The first edition of *LB* 403–10) One spirit talks to the other spirit about how the ancient mariner broke the affectionate connection with an albatross by killing it, which the polar spirit loved and, which loved the ancient mariner.

Readers cannot get a clue to know spirits without the gloss 393-402. The gloss states that the two spirits are invisible supernatural beings, similar to the polar spirit, and that the polar spirit took revenge on the ancient mariner severely for a long time. From the glosses, "The lonesome spirit . . . still requireth vengeance" (gloss 377-82) and "penance more will do" (409), the polar spirit is expected to take revenge on him.

The variety of the supernatural beings interests readers because of the differences between them, and makes them feel desire to know unknown beings and world. Though several "spirits" not being depicted except voices, how the supernatural beings were effectively disembodied has been considered. Following the "spirits," the elaborate physical

depictions as a poetic technique, of a supernatural pair, which is "The spectre-woman and her death-mate" (gloss 187-88), will be considered next.

As the other example, "the spectre-woman," which is "[a being] far liker Death than he [fleshless Pheere]" in *LB*, is revised to "the Nightmare Life-in-Death" after *SL*.

> Her lips are red, her looks are free,
> Her locks are yellow as gold:
> Her skin is as white as leprosy,
> And she is far liker Death than he;
> Her flesh makes the still air cold. (The first edition of *LB* 186-90)

She has red lips, yellow gold hair, and skin as white as leprosy. Swanepoel notes that her description consists of known words like "lips," "looks," "locks," and "skin" to evoke interest in her as an unknown being (207-08). She is described with only a few characteristic colors, so readers cannot get any information about her materiality, solidity, weight, and height. They can only recall her figure lacking a distinct outline dimly and from afar.

Therefore, the figure with few descriptions makes her seem real. Instead, if she had been described concretely and in detail, her fabrication would have looked unnatural or unreal. Thus, the less depiction and the less coloring cause a fear in human mind, which connects with "the suspension of disbelief."

On the other hand, "her death-mate," which is "fleshless Pheere" in *LB*, is revised to "the Death" after *SL*.

> His [fleshless Pheere's] bones were black with many a crack,
> All black and bare, I [the ancient mariner] ween;
> Jet-black and bare, save where with rust
> Of mouldy damps and charnel crust

> They're patch'd with purple and green. (The first edition of *LB* 181-85)

The depiction of "fleshless Pheere" has colors of "black" (181) (182) (183), "purple," and "green," and a sense of touch of "rust," and "mouldy damps." However, from the point of view of uniformity, each of "far liker Death than he" (189) and "fleshless Pheere" (180) is arranged in vertical parallel, and so they bring about an imbalance and a lack of uniformity each other. The supernatural characteristics of the former are more distinguishing and clearly embodied than those of the latter.

"[F]leshless Pheere" is revised to "her Mate" without alternation of the depiction in the second edition of *LB* (1800), and to only one word, "the Death," with no other depictions after *SL*. Regarding the disembodiment of "the Death," we recognize Coleridge's poetic technique to induce "the suspension of disbelief," which comes from the idea that less or not depicting draws imagination with fear from human mind to lead to a sense of reality.

Conclusion

This paper considered Coleridge's poetic techniques of "the suspension of disbelief" by analyzing concrete depictions in "The Mariner." The coinage combining known words, or the new combination of words plays a significant role to give readers sense of familiarity and reality of the supernatural world, and also a sense of fear. In addition, the embodiment of the ancient mariner's consciousness makes them sympathetic to his realistic loneliness and eager wish for death. Moreover, the disembodiment of the supernatural beings causes a sense of fear that draws human imagination, by which they can see the illusion of the supernatural beings.

Notes

[1] Samuel Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. R. W. Desai (London: Sangum, 1997) 110.

[2] Colin Radford, "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?" *Supplement to the Proceedings of The Aristotelian Society* 49 (1975): 67-80.

[3] Elisa Galgut, "Poetic faith and prosaic concerns. A defense of suspension of disbelief," *Study of African Journal of Philosophy* 21(2002): (3): 190-99. Noél Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[4] This paper uses Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. In Seven Parts," *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, vol.1, pt.1, The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge 16 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001) 371-419. For cross reference of the text, see Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, vol.2. pt1, 504-39.

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